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HELPING TO CONTROL FLOODS AT THEIR SOURCE - III

A radio discussion among F. A. Silcox, Chief of Forest Service, Hugh H. Bennett, Chief of Soil Conservation Service, and Milton S. Eisenhower, Director of Information, broadcast Thursday, February 25, 1937, in the Department of Agriculture period, National Farm and Home Hour, by 57 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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SALISBURY:

Today we present again Mr. Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, Mr. Silcox, Chief of the Forest Service, and Mr. Eisenhower, Director of Information. This is their third discussion with Farm and Home listeners on the part that proper land use and upstream engineering must play in flood prevention and control. All right, Milton --

EISENHOWER:

Thank you, Morse, and hello, everyone. In our first discussion, you will recall, Mr. Silcox, Mr. Bennett, and I told you that proper land use and upstream engineering can make five important contributions in flood prevention. In our second discussion we told you about the Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936 and the work the Congress instructed the Department to get under way. We also pointed out that this new job logically grows out of the work already being done by the Department in putting land to its proper use -- whether that be forestry, grass, or cultivated crops.

Today, we want to indicate the part that States and private individuals can take in preventing floods at their source. Frankly, this is a pretty stiff assignment and I hardly know where to begin. Sil, do you have a suggestion?

SILCOX:

Well, we know that many of the States right now are considering what type of flood-control legislation they should adopt, and they're writing to the Department of Agriculture for information. It might be well to begin by telling what information we have on this. What do you think, Hugh?

BENNETT:

Let's be certain that we bring out the exact status of Federal and State legislation in this whole field. The Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936 places a very great responsibility upon the War Department for flood control in trunk streams. We should make it clear to Farm and Home listeners that we are not referring to that part of the Act, or to the State cooperation that is necessary in the War Department's part of the program.

EISENHOWER:

That's extremely important, Hugh. While our work upstream and on the watersheds must be coordinated with the engineering phases of the program down-stream, we should ask everyone -- all the States -- to get in touch with the War Department if they want information on that phase of the problem.

SILCOX:

We should also repeat what we said last week -- that the Department of Agriculture now has authority only to survey key watersheds and to recommend plans for flood prevention and control to Congress. We do not, as yet, have authority under this Act to begin actual control work on the watersheds.

BENNETT:

Yes, when you come right down to it, Milton, do we really have anything authoritative we can say now about State and individual cooperation?

EISENHOWER:

Well, certainly, we can't say "Here's the final answer." No one is in a position to provide the final answer. Yet certainly the States and private individuals are calling for information. I am sure we can, in a general way at least, be helpful.

SILCOX:

We can make certain general principles clear.

BENNETT:

Perhaps this is the thing to stress: Flood prevention upstream means that all land subject to erosion and accelerated run-off must be put to its best use -- regardless of who owns the land. This means that trees must be planted, terraces must be built, many fields must be strip-cropped, fertilizer must be applied, and so on. Now, all this requires labor and materials. It costs money. And I repeat: The work must be done, regardless of who owns the land, if we are to combat floods effectively.

SILCOX:

Your statement, Hugh, leads logically to this question: How can we get the cooperation of all land owners or occupiers, and who will pay for the necessary work -- or who will provide the necessary materials and labor? We can't answer this definitely. Only Congress, the State legislatures, and local groups can provide the final answer. But we can show what is being done in very similar types of work.

BENNETT:

Yes. In our soil conservation work, we are demonstrating all phases of soil and water conservation on both public and private agricultural lands. On the privately-owned land, the farmer is paying about half the cost and the government is paying about half.

EISENHOWER:

But, of course, that is true only of your work on soil conservation projects. That doesn't extend to all farms.

BENNETT:

Oh, no. If soil conservation practices are to be adopted by farmers everywhere that they are needed -- and that's the real aim of our work -- farmers must band themselves together so that they can tackle the problem cooperatively. In other words, instead of attempting the very difficult task of cooperating with all farmers individually, the Federal and State agencies must work through associations of farmers.

EISENHOWER:

That's the reason the Department is recommending a standard State Soil Conservation Act, isn't it?

BENNETT:

Yes. So many States asked us how they could provide for local cooperation in soil conservation work that the Department prepared this suggested Act. It is a recommendation growing out of Section 3 of the Federal Soil Conservation Act that authorizes us to cooperate with local agencies.

SILCOX:

I think, Hugh, that you should very briefly summarize the provisions of the suggested State Act. It is merely permissive legislation. It doesn't compel anyone to do anything. It comes to this: A State can adopt legislation which will permit land owners and occupiers to form legally-constituted associations when and if they want to.

BENNETT:

That's it, precisely. If a substantial majority of the farmers in a watershed wanted to form an association, the State Act would authorize them to do so.

SILCOX:

Farmers would hold their own election.

BENNETT:

Yes. Subsequently, they may hold a referendum to vote upon and establish for themselves any land-use regulations that may be needed to bring about soil and moisture conservation.

SILCOX:

Once an association is set up, it can apply for the assistance of Federal and State agencies even though such assistance might be limited to technical help. It can also execute legal agreements with private land owners.

EISENHOWER:

Doesn't that bring us to the important point in this discussion on Flood Control? This same standard State Act is worthy of study by the States and private individuals in connection with comprehensive watershed protection for flood-control purposes. In other words, if farmers were organized into legally constituted associations, they would be in a position to cooperate not only in soil conservation, but also in any future flood prevention program. Isn't that correct?

BENNETT:

That's correct.

EISENHOWER:

Now, can listeners get copies of this recommended Standard State Soil Conservation Act to study?

BENNETT:

Well, we have only a few copies of the Act itself and many people find it difficult to understand the legal phraseology, but I hope that soon we can have a simple explanation of the main provisions to send to all who are interested.

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EISENHOWER:

Sil, are there any special forestry angles in this problem of State and private cooperation in flood prevention upstream?

SILCOX:

Yes, Milton, there are. But it would take far too much time to show how existing Federal and State forestry legislation fits into the whole picture. I doubt if that's necessary anyway. We've made it clear, I think, that if flood prevention upstream is to be effective, there simply must be cooperation between the man who owns or operates the individual piece of land, his neighbors in that watershed, the State, and the Federal Government. Just what the exact degree of cooperation will have to be, no one knows. But we do know that steps can be taken now to provide for cooperation in almost any degree, and then when cooperative flood control work becomes possible, we will be ready to go ahead together.

EISENHOWER:

That's a fine summary, Sil. Just one more thing -- we've been discussing the possibility of States and local groups looking forward to cooperation in actual control work. But as we've said many times, our first job is to survey the watersheds named in the Flood Control Act. Can States and local people cooperate in this? How about it, Hugh?

BENNETT:

Yes, they can. In many ways. When the Department's survey work gets under way, local people can tell us about flood conditions in the past in their localities. We will have to examine the soil, the type of vegetation, slope, degree of erosion and so on. Also, Congress will want to know whether a substantial majority of the people in a given area will wish to cooperate

in a comprehensive program. In addition, there will be many ways in which the various State agencies can be helpful. The Department plans to call upon them.

EISENHOWER:

Our time is up -- so back to you, Morse.

SALISBURY:

Thanks very much to the three of you. You plan to take up another phase of this question next week, do you not, Milton?

EISENHOWER:

Yes. We thought we would discuss the relationship of watershed protection to the welfare of folks in the cities.

SALISBURY:

Fine. Farm and Home Hour listeners, you have heard another discussion on watershed protection and upstream engineering by F. A. Silcox, Chief of the Forest Service; H. H. Bennett, Chief of the Soil Conservation Service, and M. S. Eisenhower, Director of Information. They'll report to you again next week.

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